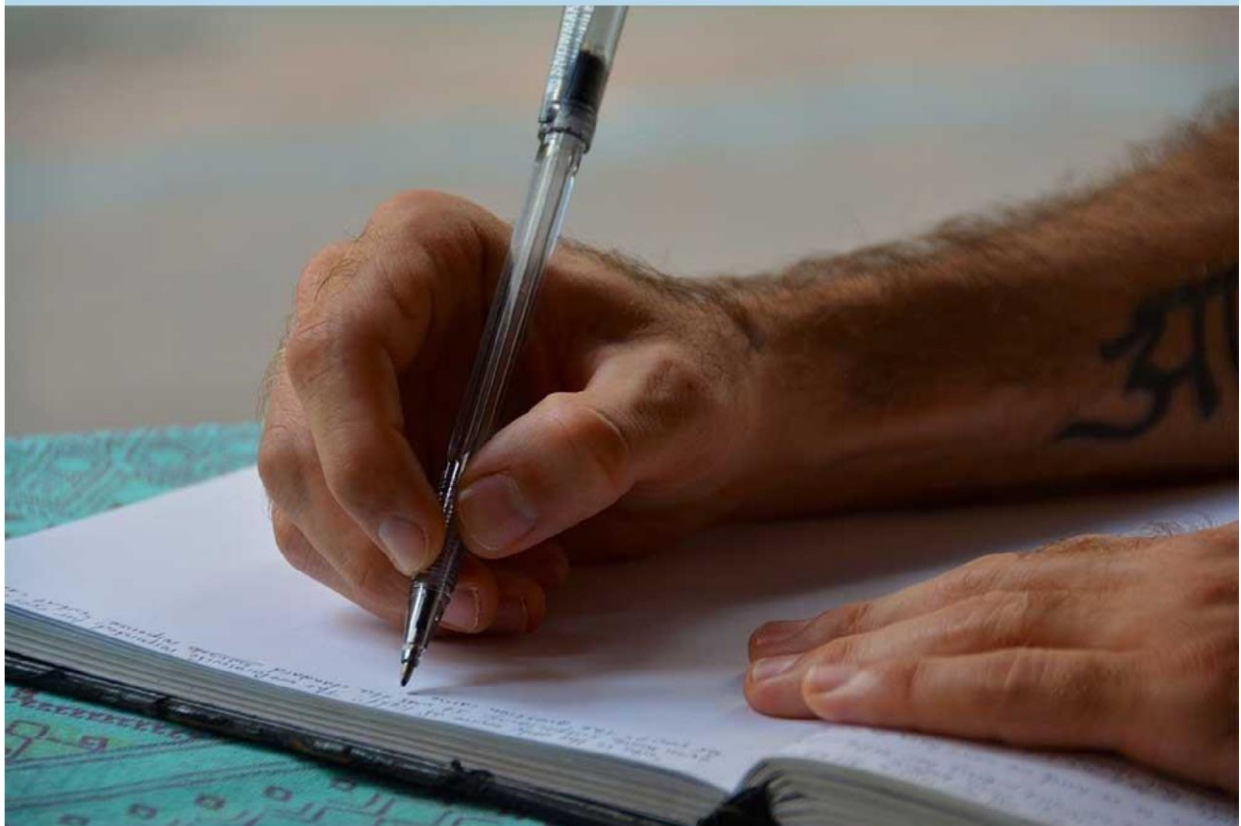


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Analyzing Indian Socio-Political Thoughts, Hunger and Freedom in Bhabhani Bhattacharya's Novel "*So Many Hungers*"

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the Indian cultural background having the themes like hunger, poverty, famine, war, politics, freedom, imperialism, economic exploitation, class consciousness in the Indo-Anglian English fiction writer Bhabani Bhattacharya's novel *So Many Hungers!*, related to the socio-political and economic situations of Bengali's society. The theme of the novel is mainly the existing pressing problems of India, especially the rural India before and after the Independence. Realism is one of the most remarkable features of Bhabani Bhattacharya's fiction. His novel shows a passionate awareness of life in India, the social awakening and protest, the utter poverty of peasants, the Indian freedom struggle and its various dimensions,

the tragedy of partition of the country, the social and political transitions, the mental as well as the physical agony of the poor peasants and labor class people of the Indian society, especially that of Bengal and other adjoining states. Bhattacharya believes that an artist should inevitably be concerned with truth and reality, his portrayal of the life and society is never a photographic one nor a journalistic record. One can very well find the reflection of Indian culture, tradition and struggle in it.

Keywords: Socio-political, Hunger, Rural India, Peasants, Partition, Realism.

Introduction

Bhabani Bhattacharya has a remarkable place among the 20th century Indo-Anglican writers. His novels, *So Many Hungers!*, *He Who Rides A Tiger*, *Shadow From Laddakh*, *Music For Mohini*, *A Dream In Hawaii* as well as his stories have worldwide acclaim. His works have been translated into 26 languages. His first novel *So Many Hungers!* (1947) is set against the Bengal Famine and Quit India Movement and deals with the theme of hunger and degradation. Various types of hungers mentioned in it are hunger for food, hunger for sex, hunger for money, hunger for love, hunger for freedom, hunger for name and fame. These hungers are not confined to a particular place or community but are universal and they are applied to the international community as well. Bhabani Bhattacharya is of the view that art must have purposiveness and the novel must have a social purpose. He himself confirmed this view point in an interview:

“I hold that a novel must have a social purpose. It must place before the reader something from the society's point of view. Art is not necessarily for art's sake. Purposeless art and literature which is much in vogue does not appear to me a sound judgment.” (Badal, 1975)

The novel portrays the sufferings, trials and tribulations of the people of Bengal in general and the other people of Calcutta and its adjoining village of Baruni. This novel is written in the backdrop of man-made Bengal famine of 1942-43 when during war years a few black marketers started hoarding rice. The period coincides with Gandhian Satyagraha struggle, which culminated in Quit India Movement. Bhattacharya's first novel, *So Many Hungers!* is a deeply moving and impressive work of art. It is a grim tale, compounded by sighs and tears, misery and squalor, poverty and hunger, and heroic suffering and sacrifice, based on facts personally observed and faithfully reported. Yet, the novel is not journalistic because of the judicious selection, careful organization, and artistic control that have gone into its making.

So Many

Hungers! can be taken as:

“A worthy illustration of how contemporary history can be transformed by a socially conscious artist into fiction of permanent relevance to mankind.” (Gupta, 1979)

The writer's explains different and multiple aspects of these hungers. Hunger for political freedom from imperial expansion, for money, for food, for sex, for human dignity and respect and hunger as spiritual weapon employed by the freedom fighters who have gone on hunger strike under the leadership of Devesh Basu. In *So Many Hungers!*, hunger for food is best mentioned, it makes humans inhuman. They forgot their cultural and ethical values, the starving men quarrel fiercely for a little bit of food. The shortage of food compels a mother to eat food, while her child is lying dead in lap. Hunger also impels a girl to show her naked to men for the sake of morsels of food for herself and her dear ones. The Writer portrays a picture of that condition of hunger in the novel:

"Wave after wave of hunger stricken masses surging from the country side. A great many were in no fit state to consume solid food. They ate and died. To give them rice was to kill them."

(*So Many Hungers!*, p.286)

Bhattacharya paints the picture of India in *So Many Hungers!*, where millions of people have died of hunger for food, Samarendra dies of hunger for wealth, which he has amassed. He loves his son very much but his love for money surpasses it even. Rahoul goes to Cambridge with his hunger for knowledge and returns India with his D.Sc. degree. His hunger for research prevents him joining the National Movement at once. Kunal has an unflinching hunger for joining the army and he is satisfied only after joining it. Devata has hunger for serving the poor and ignorant and he finds satisfaction after he is arrested by the court. He has conquered all Hungers by his hunger for self-service. Sir Abalabandhu's hunger for name, fame and money knows no bound and is never satisfied, only death and nothing else can satisfy such an evil man. There are two people whose hunger reveals that despite the adversities humanity still prevails. The one example is that of a young woman who sells her so called body's sanctity to feed the helpless destitute. The other is the hunger experienced by a beggar who sells his meal ticket to a needier person. It is this hunger for sacrifice that binds all humanity into one eternal race conquering so many hungers that come to surface now and then. Balram S. Sorot writes:

"While in the novels of the Indian – English writers in general, the problem of conflict or synthesis between tradition and modernity figures as a secondary theme, in the writings of Bhabani

Bhattacharya it assumes the significance of the dominating issue In contemporary Indian life. The author analyses the political, religious, social and economic problems of modern India through the perspective of this basic conflict in our ethos." (Sorot, 1991)

Presentation of revolutionary motif of the Indian people and their involvement in the freedom movement and freedom struggle, national uprising against the foreign rule and the unique influence of Tagore, Gandhi and Nehru on the movement and its events, delineation of characters and content of thought and action, construction of plot are all typically Indian and well connected. The novelist has a keen eye to observe and exploit the minutest details from the Indian culture, tradition and religious beliefs. His knowledge of Indian tradition and moral religious values and practices is simply amazing. He has used this knowledge so artistically that they have become the part and parcel of the novel.

Discussion and Analysis

The purging power of suffering and human agony is typical to Indian culture and religion. Indian tradition and religious practice endorse it. Likewise, Devata, the grandfather of Rahoul, comments in the novel *So Many Hungers* that “The farmers are good human beings because Centuries of hardship and strain have not destroyed their faith in human values.” In this novel Bhattacharya refers to the peoples’ hunger for food and for freedom, the two pressing problems at the momentous moment of India. And this twofold hunger is dealt with as the central theme of his first novel. The novelist has successfully and artistically inter-twisted the historic Bengal famine of 1943 and the Quit India Movement of 1942. A close analysis of the novel shows that the title *So Many Hungers* is highly justified.

Woes and Miseries

The novel represents many hungers of man, food, love, affection, lust, money, name and fame, political freedom, imperial expansion, human dignity, self-respect etc. All interweaves together is the central theme of the novel. The very title of the novel is very justified and suggestive of all there hungers of man. The man made famine of Bengal and

man's insatiable hunger for wealth and many are main motif of the novel. This motif is brought out against the backdrop of the Quit India Movement and Gandhiji's Satyagrah for total freedom of the country.

The exploitation compels them to leave their birth places. Chandrasekharan's observation in Bhabani Bhattacharya in this regard is worth noting:

"*So Many Hungers!* is a severe indictment both of the foreign government for its apathy and neglect and of unprincipled Indians who exploit the situation for their own benefit and who are no better than the vultures and jackals 'waiting for the flesh that dies' and sometimes not even waiting till it dies. The novelist's righteous indignation, his sincerity and his compassion are in evidence all through the novel. It undoubtedly presents an artistic success." (Chandrasekharan, 1974)

The two themes of the novel are shown through the two families of Kajoli and Rahoul and the various events inter mixed. The plot of the novel is very simple yet coherent weaving out successfully the two main strands in the novel. The story of Rahoul's family and peasant girl Kajoli's family are well united and interwoven with the main themes of the novel, i.e., the historic famine and the freedom movement of the country. Devish Basu is an important character in the novel as he happens to join the two families together, i.e., of Rahoul and Kajoli. Devish Basu lives in the village Baruni with the family of Kajoli leaving behind the family of this son and grandsons rolling in the luxury of the city life. He is the source of inspiration to both the peasant girl kajoli and the city fellow Rahoul. At one level, *So Many Hungers* is the story of Rahoul, an astrophysicist in the University of Calcutta and the grandson of Devish Basu. The story unfolds his gradual development as a freedom fighter and follower of Gandhiji.

Fight for Freedom

In the beginning of the novel, Rahoul looks busy with his studies and research at Cambridge University and he has nothing to do with India, later on the historic famine of Bengal and subsequent deaths of millions of people make him very upset. His lofty ideas and refined views of life and human existence make him an ideal man. He wants to bring social change on the basis of his optimistic and ideal view of life and society. He is full of the inner confidence that sacrifice of men and women will not go astray and bring change in Bengal in the wake of the Bengal famine and the death of millions of people due to it. So in spite of the fact that he is a son of a rich trade man and profiteer, he offers free help to the poor and needy people suffering from a great man-made human tragedy. His younger brother Kunal is also very lovable and affectionate character; like his brother Rahoul, Kunal too is a spirited and adventurous young man embodying noble ethics and cheerful disposition but his presence is limited to only in the earlier part of the novel. Nothing is heard about him after his leaving home for service in North Africa and Italy as an army officer. Rahoul's father Samrendra Basu, a lawyer by profession, is just the opposite of Devish Basu. Semrendra Basu's character in the novel is pitted against the character of Devish Basu on the one hand and Rahoul and Kunal on the other hand. He is very shrewd and greedy person and has no feeling for the nation or society. His only aim is to amass huge wealth, name and fame by pleasing the British rulers. His trade company named 'Cheap Rice Ltd' collects rice from the farmers on the cheap rate and boards it to sale it later on high prices. He is very proud of his sons but towards the end of the novel his dreams are shattered when the report of Kunal missing in Italy and the news of Rahoul's arrest come simultaneously to him in connection with the historic Quit India Movement. His father Devish Basu, popularly known as Devata is a prototype of Gandhiji himself. He is beloved and venerated by the people of Baruni village. He has infused Rahoul with trust in existence. In fact, the character portrayal of Dervish Basu

is based on Gandhiji and represents his principles of life with all its dignity, courage and strength of truth and moral values. He always thinks about the welfare of the villagers. He advises the villagers not to sell rice to the government agents and thus tries to save them from their exploitation at the hands for tradesmen and hoarders of rice.

The village Baruni is a miniature India and as such it agitates and gathers momentum and fervour in the wake of Gandhiji's famous quit India movement. Dervesh Basu, like a true follower of Gandhiji urges the people of the village not to pay taxes to the unjust ruler. The story of the peasant girl Kajoli comes in to represent another hunger in the novel. Her story is brought into focus on the issue of poverty, destitution and hunger for food caused by the man made famine. In a personal letter written to Professor K. R. Chandrasekharan, Bhattacharya mentions that the incident of the jackal trying to eat living persons is based on news reports and that the incident of a baby sucking the breast of the dead mother on a railway platform is an eye-witness account. Thus, in writing *So Many Hungers!*:

“Simultaneously to be objective, to make an emotional impact on the reader, and prevent his own affronted humanity from subjectively coloring the picture.” (Bhattacharya, 1972)

Kajoli's father and brother Kanu are arrested for their joining the Civil Disobedience Movement. But Devish Basu or Devata adopts Kajoli's mother as his daughter and takes care of the family in the absence of her father and brother. Later on, Devata is also arrested for taking part in the movement and taken to Dehradun jail. Devata, strongly protests his arrest and starts a fast unto death in the jail itself in the mid of the historic Quit India Movement. Thus, the story of novel *So Many Hungers* Works on two levels, the historic Quit India Movement and the unfortunate Bengal Famine with references to the nationwide agitation of Gandhiji and the unjust rule of the Britishers on one hand and the hunger, destitution, death and sufferings of the people on the other hand in the wake of Bengal famine. The plot of the

novel is a composite one and the stories of Rahoul and Kajoli are intermixed to expose the two themes of the novel, freedom and hunger. Rahoul is the key figure of the novel as he represents the youth of India, educated progressive and strong. Like other youths he wants to see India free from the foreign rule of the British and make the people happy. Bhattacharya successfully portrays a complete change in the personality of Rahoul under the influence of movement from academic city elite to a traditional devoted freedom fighter. After meeting his grandfather in the central jail of Dehradun, Rahoul plunges into the historic Quit India Movement and thus fights against the unjust rule of the British in India. One day, he is also arrested and taken to jail. At the prison gate he is joined by other prisoners. Together, they all sing Tagore's memorable song," The more they tighten the chains, the more the chains loosen." The novel ends with the close of

Rahoul's story as he seeks voluntary imprisonment for the country freedom. The plot of the novel is very composite in nature and the story of Rahoul with the theme of political freedom is inter mixed with that of Kajoli and her family suffering hunger and destitution in the wake of Bengal famine. The Tragedy of the innocent Kajoli family is the premonition and symbolic shape of devastation affecting the whole of Bengal.

Representation of Women

Kajoli's mother handed over the cow Mangala to the destitute fisher woman, in order to save her and her baby. There was an empty jam tin in the garbage heap. There was a little quantity of remnants in the tin. Onu, the brother of Kajoli wanted to pick up the jam tin, but there was a dog which prevented him from picking up the tin. A destitute boy, bigger than Onu, on seeing the fight between the dog and Onu, rushed to the spot and fought with the dog.

Driving the dog away, the bigger boy picked up the jam tin. He tells Onu: "Lick this side; the other side belongs to my mouth. Lick." (*So Many Hungers!*). This reveals his second victory, the first being against the dog. Onu, who initially refused to share the figs with his friends later realized that they too had brothers and sisters. It was only to feed them that they fought with Onu. Realizing this, it is magnanimous gesture indeed. Bhabani by narrating these acts of some of the destitute reveals their human spirit in them. Bhattacharya has presented the characteristic portrayal of a highly idealized Indian woman through the character of Kajoli. She represents the image of new woman as heralded by Gandhian thought and our nationalist movement. Bhattacharya creates scenes after scenes, which depict the helplessness and pathetic condition of the villagers, peasants and laborers leaving their homes and marching towards the big city in search of food and jobs, millions of men, women and children rendered homeless and penniless by this calamity. It was a worse condition:

"While the hoarders, profiteers and black-marketers plied a thundering trade, authority was apathetic, the wells of human pity seemed to have almost dried up., and only the jackals and vultures were in vigorous and jubilant action."(Iyengar, 1973, p.413)

The sufferings met by Kajoli and her family on her way to Calcutta are not theirs only but of all those people who pour into the city in search of food and help. On the way, Kajoli is raped by sexually starving soldier leaving her to bleed helplessly. In this condition, a jackal attempts to eat up Kajoli but her younger brother Onu somehow drives it away. She is sent to a hospital by the soldiers and thus somehow her life is saved. Her aged mother and Onu are forced to earn their living through begging on the streets of the city. The city itself presents the pathetic plight of the poor people more and more people come to the city in search of food and job and there is no body to help them. Even the government officials do nothing to overcome the man made crisis. Rahoul is a symbol of enthusiastic working Indian while Kajoli represents a peasant girl of Bengal in 1943.

At times, hungry people eat what the animals refuse to take. In this struggle for food, animals often prove stronger than the weak suffering folk. Boys fight with boys for scrap of food. After her discharge from the hospital, Kajoli finds it difficult to maintain her family in these circumstances and even decides to go to a brothel. When Kajoli is discharged from the hospital she faces starvation again. When an offer comes from a betel-woman who also runs a brothel, to be a prostitute for a handsome amount of money, she spurns it. But the growing misery of their starvation, particularly of her mother's, makes her accept the woman's offer: "Kajoli had made her grim decision. She would sell the last thing she owned- -herself. Mother was dying. She ailed, and could not eat the poor fare her son and daughter provided, begging on the streets and picking in the garbage. She needed shelter, too, because of the severe winter cold that had affected her chest. All this could be had for the money the agent offered."

(So Many Hungers!, p.203)

On the way to the brothel, she hears an announcement by Devesh Basu, who is speaking on the Gandhian philosophy:

"Friends and comrades do not betray the flag. Do not betray yourselves. There is violence in your thoughts that is evil enough. Do not make it worse by violence in action...Be strong. Be true. Be deathless." *(So Many Hungers! p.15)*

But on the way, she hears the newspaper vendor's voice shouting about Devata's first unto death in the prison at Dehradun. She is, thus, reminded of the words of Devata and so decides to earn an honest living by becoming a newspaper vendor in the city.

Inhumanity and Heartlessness

The novel is full of many scenes of poverty and destitution in the wake of Bengal famine and the callous attitude of the government officials. The fishing boats are destroyed,

villagers are evacuated, and peasants are forced to sell their grains to the government agents and greedy hoarders and profiteers. The common people are thus reduced to paupers whose life becomes a tale of sorrow and pain. The end of one tale is the beginning of another tale. Men, women and children of Bengal sink down and die due to the acute shortage of food in the villages of Bengal. "Corpses lay by the road, huddling together. Picked to the bone; Only the hair uneaten-fluffy baby's hair, man's hair, the waist-long hair of women." (*So Many Hungers!* p.142)

Thus, the major part of the novel comprises a series of snapshots of gruesome pictures of men, women, and children. The poor and destitute humanity begins its march towards the rich city of Calcutta in search of food and employment. In such a difficult situation, Kajoli marries a Youngman named Kishore. But her happiness is short lived as Kishore is killed in a railway accident on his way to Calcutta. By this time, Kajoli is five months pregnant. She along with the family, mother and younger brothers begin to live on roots, figs and whatever they can get in the name of food. They start selling their little family belongings including the cow-bell. The mother offers the family cow to a fisher woman to save the life of the starving child. Later on, finding no possibility to live in the village, Kajoli, her mother and little brother Onu also join the cavalcade of starving masses towards Calcutta. According to K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar:

"*So Many Hungers!* is no doubt an impeachment of man's

Inhumanity to man, but it is also a dramatic study of a set of human beings caught in a unique and tragic predicament."

Iyengar, 1973, p.324)

Being a keen historian, his knowledge of history is clearly reflected in the background of almost all his novels. He was influenced by many Indian writers like Rabindranath Tagore,

Mahatma Gandhi, and Jawaharlal Nehru as well as by Western writers like Leo Tolstoy, Bernard Shaw and Henrik Ibsen for their realism. The impact of their thinking and works are omnipresent in the novels of Bhattacharya.

Conclusion

On the whole, his novel is remarkable for social realism and its honest treatment of theme, problems of contemporary India. India's social realism, problems, poverty, destitution and hunger find a successful depiction in it. India, all its rich heritage social, historical and geographical variety, to get focused in his novel. As a novelist, he is true to his purpose of writing and his character delineation and presentation of Indian people's problems and challenges is artistic and in-depth. His mastery and control over the incidents and events of the novel is really marvellous and enchanting. This adds to his success as a novelist and social realist of present day India. Bhattacharya shows his concern about women exploitation in the patriarchal system. He wants to attack the conventional attitude of men towards women. He gives a message to the people through his novel to get freedom from their foreign masters, which is the clear indication to break the chains of imperialism in India. The novel suggested the poor masses of India, how to overcome their weaknesses and to avoid their exploitations. They should not for the miracles rather they have to move forward in a right direction without waiting of any miracle. Freedom is a means to that end, and one can attain it only through hard labor and love. Each of us has to win the freedom to be free. He highlights the basic human instincts by showing victory of morality over selfishness.

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